

Vayigash: Geulas Yisrael #30
The Exile of the Shechinah

Ya'akov's worst fears are coming true. Having already spent twenty-two years outside his homeland, adrift in a Northern exile, Ya'akov had hoped to return to Israel and enjoy the tranquility of "retirement". Yet, Hashem had other plans for him, as his life turns both chaotic and tragic. He suffers the crushing "loss" of his favored son Yosef, and watches as Shimon is incarcerated and Binyamin is imperiled. Upon finally discovering that all his children are safe, Ya'akov faces a new and more arduous challenge: Should he join Yosef in Egypt? He is inexorably drawn to his son but is anxious and even hesitant about departing the land of Israel. Filled with uncertainty, he visits the city of his father- Be'er Sheva-looking for divine guidance.

He receives his answer in a nighttime visit from Hashem. Ya'akov is instructed to journey to Egypt, but this time- unlike his first departure from Israel- he will not be traveling alone. Hashem assures him - אנכי ארד - מצרימה - promising to personally escort him down to Egypt. Not only will Hashem escort him, but one day Ya'akov's return to Israel will also be accompanied by Hashem- ואנכי אעלך גם עלה . Confident that he would not be abandoned in a foreign land, Ya'akov leaves his homeland- never to return alive.

This divine promise is a not just a private assurance extended to Ya'akov. This announcement establishes an important historical condition known in Kabbalah as שכינתא בגלותא . Hashem is infinite and exists beyond space and outside of time. Yet His concentrated presence in our world- the shechinah- inheres in particular locations. Ideally, the shechinah resides in Yerushalayim and is pivoted upon the Mikdash. What happens to the shechinah after the Mikdash is destroyed and the Jews depart Yerushalayim?

The gemara in Rosh Hashanah describes the ten stages of the shechinah gradually vacating the Mikdash. Stage by stage it withdrew from the inner sanctum of the kodosh hakodoshim , to the outer sections of the Temple mount, ultimately, entirely fleeing Yerushalayim and settling in a desert retreat. Was this the final destination of the shechinah? As the Jews journeyed to foreign lands would the shechinah remain sequestered in the desert mountains surrounding Yerushalayim? The doctrine of שכינתא בגלותא , coded in this pasuk and elaborated in kaballah, provides the encouraging answer: Where ever the Jewish people are exiled to, the "presence of Hashem" or the shechinah accompanies them. We are never fully alone.

This groundbreaking notion revolutionizes the concept of Jewish exile or galus. How can a nation survive being violently discharged from their

homeland and angrily scorned by the very G-d who awarded them this land. Being irately cast away by a loving G-d is devastating! The doctrine of שכינתא בגלותא comforts us that, as furious as Hashem may be, our historic bond is never fully broken. We may be distant from Yerushalayim but we are close to the shechinah.

Even in foreign lands it wasn't too difficult to locate the shechinah's presence and its new home. Jews always constructed batei kneset and batei midrash- houses of prayer and of study- to shelter the exiled shechinah. In the 6th century BCE, during the initial stages of the first exile, Jews resettled to areas near modern day- Baghdad. Carrying stones and dirt from the Mikdash, they built a legendary beit kneset called the 'relocated shul' or שף ויתבי, highlighting the new Babylonian home for the shechinah. This historic beit hakneset (which according to some accounts lasted close to 1600 years) was just the first beit kneset to fulfill the guarantee to Ya'akov of the shechinah accompanying Jewish exile.

The doctrine of שכינתא בגלותא doesn't just promise us the intimacy and protection of the shechinah in foreign lands. By phrasing His promise with the term אנכי ארד -which can also be read as "I will descend", Hashem promises that His shechinah will suffer alongside Jewish suffering. The fate of the shechinah in this world has now been hitched to the fate of the Jewish people. As the Jews suffer, the shechinah falls, just as the shechinah is restituted as the Jews are redeemed. This promise about descent and ascent bonds the fate of the shechinah to Jewish destiny. Tikkun chatzot is a practice to arise at around midnight to pray for redemption. The opening paragraph of this prayer stresses that we are also praying for the redemption of the exiled shechinah or the שכינה בגלות .

In the 18th century, at a very dark point of Jewish history, Chassidut arose, to reassure the Jewish people that, despite an interminable exile, the love between nation and their G-d was inalienable. This reassurance based upon the doctrine of שכינתא בגלותא invigorated a demoralized nation whose faith had been battered by centuries of persecution. This message provided the national confidence to begin the modern return to our homeland. Wherever a Jew traveled- literally and figuratively- the shechinah was present- even in the darkest and most remote regions of a ceaseless galus. The promise to Ya'akov is everlasting.